

FUEL CELL WITH INTEGRAL MANIFOLD

TECHNICAL FIELD

- 5 This invention relates to fuel cells and more particularly to a MEMS-based planar fuel cell having an integral manifold and to methods for making and using such fuel cells.

BACKGROUND

- Various portable devices, such as laptop computers, personal digital assistants
10 (PDA's), portable digital and video cameras, portable music players, portable electronic games, and cellular phones or other wireless devices, require portable power sources. The weight and inconveniences of single-use batteries and rechargeable batteries have motivated efforts to replace those power sources for portable use. Thus, there is an increasing demand for light-weight,
15 re-usable, efficient, and reliable power sources in such applications and in many other applications as well. In attempts to meet these needs, various portable fuel cells have been developed, such as ceramic-based solid-oxide fuel cells, direct methanol fuel-cell (DMFC) systems, reformed-methanol-to-hydrogen fuel-cell (RMHFC) systems, and other proton-exchange-membrane (PEM) fuel-cell
20 systems. Microscale design principles have been applied to the design of portable fuel cells to provide improved power density and efficiency and to provide lower cost. However, microscale fuel-cell designs can be difficult to supply with fuel and oxidant in ways that do not interfere with the purposes of the microscale design. Similarly, it can also be difficult to exhaust depleted fuel
25 and oxidant in a microscale-compatible manner. Although nanoscale manifolding with minimum dimensions below one micrometer has been developed for sensors and other purposes, the scale of such nanoscale manifolding is ill-suited for microscale fuel cell designs. There is a continuing need and a large anticipated market for improved practical compact portable
30 fuel cells with rapid startup times and improved efficiency. There is a particular

need for compact portable fuel cells with improved microscale manifolding of supplied fuel and/or supplied oxidant and with improved microscale manifolding for exhausting depleted oxidant and/or depleted fuel from the fuel-cell active region.

5 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The features and advantages of the disclosure will readily be appreciated by persons skilled in the art from the following detailed description when read in conjunction with the drawings, wherein:

FIG. 1A is a top plan view of a unit cell of a fuel-cell embodiment made in
10 accordance with the invention.

FIG. 1B is a front elevation cross-sectional view of the embodiment of FIG. 1A.

FIGS. 2A – 2D are side elevation cross-sectional views illustrating intermediate stages in fabrication of a first fuel-cell embodiment made in accordance with the invention.

15 FIGS. 3A and 3B are side elevation cross-sectional views illustrating intermediate stages in fabrication of a second fuel-cell embodiment made in accordance with the invention.

FIGS. 4A and 4B are side elevation cross-sectional views illustrating intermediate stages in fabrication of a third fuel-cell embodiment made in
20 accordance with the invention.

FIG. 5A is a flowchart illustrating an embodiment of an overall method for fabrication of a fuel cell in accordance with the invention.

FIGS. 5B – 5E are flowcharts illustrating various embodiments of substeps in methods for fabrication of a fuel cell in accordance with the invention.

25 FIG. 6 is a side elevation cross-sectional view illustrating a method for forming a portion of a fuel cell in accordance with the invention.

FIG. 7 is a side elevation cross-sectional view illustrating a method for assembling a portion of a fuel cell in accordance with the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS

Throughout this specification and the appended claims, the term “fuel cell” means a fuel cell in its usual meaning or a battery cell having at least one each of an anode, a cathode, and an electrolyte. A “unit cell” is one cell comprising an anode, a cathode, and an electrolyte. The term “MEMS” has its conventional meaning of a micro-electro-mechanical system. The prefix “micro-” and the term “microscale” refer to structures having minimum dimensions of the order of about one micrometer. The verb “flowing” is used in a transitive sense, meaning causing a flow of a fluid. The term “lateral” is used to mean generally parallel to the principal plane of a generally planar unit cell. For clarity of the description, the drawings are not drawn to a uniform scale. In particular, vertical and horizontal scales may differ from each other and may vary from one drawing to another.

In accordance with one aspect of the invention, a MEMS-based fuel cell **10** has a substrate **20**, an electrolyte **30** in contact with the substrate, a cathode **40** in contact with the electrolyte, an anode **50** spaced apart from the cathode and in contact with the electrolyte, and an integral manifold **60** for supplying either a fuel or an oxidant or both together. The integral manifold **60** extends over at least a portion of the electrolyte **30** and over at least one of the anode **50** and/or cathode **40**. In some embodiments of such a fuel cell, electrolyte **30** is also the substrate **20**, as will be made clear hereinbelow. Such a fuel cell may also be a unit cell in a fuel-cell assembly comprising a number of unit cells with suitable electrical connections. The unit cells may be stacked to form the fuel-cell assembly, for example, or may be arranged in a planar array.

FIG. 1A is a top plan view of a unit cell of a fuel-cell embodiment **10** made in accordance with the invention. FIG. 1B is a front elevation cross-sectional view of the embodiment of FIG. 1A. While substrate **20** is shown as distinct in FIG. 1A, the electrolyte **30** may also serve as the substrate for other elements in some embodiments, obviating the need for a separate substrate. As shown in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, anode **50** and cathode **40** may be interdigitated.

Chamber **70** includes manifold **60**, which may be serpentine as shown in the drawing. In this embodiment, manifold **60** extends over the entire area of anode **50** and in this case carries the fuel to the anode **50**. The exterior surface of integral manifold **60** may comprise electrolyte material.

- 5 Also shown in FIG. 1A are openings **80** and **90** which extend through substrate **20** and communicate with the interior of manifold **60**. Fuel is provided to the anode by flowing fuel through opening **80** into manifold **60**, and depleted fuel with anode-reaction products (such as water, for example) is exhausted from manifold **60** through opening **90**.
- 10 Similarly, by reversing the designations of anode and cathode in FIGS. 1A and 1B, the same drawing may be made to illustrate a manifold **60** used to provide an oxidant such as oxygen in air to cathode **40** and/or to exhaust depleted oxidant (such as oxygen-depleted air) from the cathode region. Those skilled in the art will recognize that both cathode **40** and anode **50** can be simultaneously
- 15 served by separate manifolds **60** (not shown).

- Also shown in FIG. 1A is a catalytic element **100** provided within integral manifold **60**, near the exhaust end of manifold **60**, to provide a combustor. Catalytic element **100** comprises a deposited and patterned catalyst, such as platinum or palladium, suitable for catalytic combustion of the particular fuel
- 20 used by the fuel cell, and thus provides a combustor within the integral manifold.

- The fuel cell may include a conventional current collector, e.g., a patterned film of conductive material (not shown) and at least a portion of the current collector may be disposed on an exterior surface of the integral manifold **60** or adjacent to an exterior surface of the integral manifold **60**. In some embodiments, the
- 25 current collector may be disposed on the roof of manifold **60**.

- Thus, another aspect of the invention provides a manifold **60** for a fuel cell, the manifold itself having a substrate and an elongated roof affixed to the substrate. Generally, the roof may be semi-cylindrical or have a rectangular or trapezoidal cross-section, for example. The roof encloses an elongated interior volume
- 30 communicating with the electrolyte and with at least one of the anode and

cathode of the fuel cell. The interior volume generally may be semi-cylindrical, rectangular, or trapezoidal, for example. As described hereinabove, the manifold **60** may have an opening **80** or **90** extending through the substrate, whereby the interior volume of the manifold further communicates with the opening through the substrate.

As shown in FIGS. 3A and 3B, the manifold **60** may include a porous substance **120** substantially filling the interior volume of the manifold, as described in more detail hereinbelow.

The various forms of manifold **60** provide integral means for supplying the fuel and/or the oxidant, and/or for exhausting depleted fuel and/or depleted oxidant. To do so, the various forms of manifold **60** extend over at least a portion of the electrolyte and over at least a portion of the anode and/or cathode. Those skilled in the art will recognize that fuel and oxidant inputs are conventionally provided from external sources and that exhausts of any depleted fuel and any depleted oxidant are conventionally directed to external outputs.

FABRICATION

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, a MEMS-based fuel cell **10** using a fuel and an oxidant may be fabricated by an overall method described below with reference to FIGS. 2A – 2D and 5A. More specific methods are also described below with reference to FIGS. 3A – 3B, 4A – 4B, 5B – 5D, 6 and 7. FIGS. 2A – 2D are side elevation cross-sectional views illustrating various stages in fabrication of a first fuel-cell embodiment made in accordance with the invention. FIGS. 3A and 3B are side elevation cross-sectional views illustrating stages in fabrication of a second fuel-cell embodiment. FIGS. 4A and 4B are side elevation cross-sectional views illustrating stages in fabrication of a third fuel-cell embodiment. FIG. 5A is a flowchart illustrating an embodiment of an overall method for fabrication of a fuel-cell in accordance with the invention. FIGS. 5B – 5E are flowcharts illustrating various embodiments of substeps in a method for fabrication of a fuel-cell in accordance with the invention. In the flowcharts, method steps are designated by reference numerals **S10**, ..., **S57**.

The overall fabrication method, shown in FIG. 5A, generally includes steps of:

S10, providing a substrate **20**;

S20, depositing an electrolyte **30** upon the substrate;

S30, depositing and patterning a cathode **40** in contact with the electrolyte;

5 **S40**, depositing and patterning an anode **50** spaced apart from cathode **40** and in contact with electrolyte **30**;

S50, forming a chamber **70** extending over at least a portion of at least one of the cathode and anode; and

10 **S70**, forming an opening through the substrate to communicate with chamber **70**.

Those skilled in the art will recognize that the order of cathode and anode depositions and subsequent sintering may be inverted, depending on processing temperature requirements, for example. The chamber **70** includes at least one integral manifold **60** for the fuel and/or oxidant. The chamber may
15 extend over at least the entire anode, for example. Other steps are described hereinbelow in connection with more specific methods.

For some embodiments, a portion of the substrate the anode and cathode of the unit cell may be removed (step **S60**), e.g., by conventional wet etching or dry plasma etching, leaving a supporting membrane portion. Also, for some
20 embodiments, the method includes a step of patterning the electrolyte. The electrolyte-depositing step may comprise depositing a solid-oxide electrolyte or a proton-exchange-membrane (PEM) electrolyte, for example.

Various methods for forming chamber **70** are illustrated in FIGS. 5B – 5E. As shown in FIG. 5B, one method for forming the chamber uses substeps of:

25 **S51**, depositing a layer of sacrificial material and patterning the sacrificial material **55**;

S52, covering the sacrificial material with a suitable material to form a chamber roof (FIG. 2C); and

S53, removing sacrificial material **55** (FIG. 2D).

Sacrificial material **55** may be silicon (polycrystalline or amorphous), oxides of silicon, spin-on-glass (SOG) compounds, photoresists, pyrolyzable polymers, and other release films conventionally used in the field of MEMS fabrication.

A selection criterion for these sacrificial films is their etch selectivity in

- 5 comparison with the other fuel-cell materials used in the structure. A suitable sacrificial polymer material is a polynorbornene, such as Unity™ Sacrificial Polymer, which may be cleanly removed by pyrolysis at 350-425 C. This material is commercially available from Promerus Electronic Materials of Brecksville, OH. Alternative polymers for some applications are
- 10 polymethylmethacrylate (PMMA), polystyrene, or polyparaxylene (Parylene™) and derivatives of the latter polymer, for example.

Some suitable materials to form the chamber roof for various embodiments are silicon oxide, silicon nitride, silicon oxynitride, silicon carbide, aluminum oxide, spin-on-glass (SOG) compounds, polyimides (e.g., for low temperature cells),

15 other photopolymer systems, and the actual fuel cell electrolyte material itself.

A suitable photopolymer for some embodiments is a negative, epoxy-type, near-UV photoresist based on EPON™ (e.g., SU-8, available from MicroChem Inc. of Newton, MA). Thus, a suitable material to form the chamber roof may be an electrolyte or a non-electrolyte.

- 20 As described hereinabove, manifold **60** may include a porous substance **120** substantially filling the interior volume of the manifold. Porous substance **120** may serve as an electrode. The method for forming chamber **70** illustrated in FIG. 5C simply comprises substep **S54**, forming a porous electrode **120** (FIG. 3A), and substep **S55**, covering the porous electrode with a suitable
- 25 material to form a chamber roof (FIG. 3B). The material used to form the chamber roof may be an electrolyte **30** or a non-electrolyte.

Another method for forming chamber **70** is illustrated in FIG. 5D. This method comprises the substeps of:

- S56**, depositing and patterning a planar film of an oxidizable material **130**
- 30 (FIG. 4A); and

S57, oxidizing the oxidizable material **130** to form a chamber roof as the material expands, leaving an opening to serve as manifold **60** (FIG. 4B).

As shown in FIGS. 4A and 4B, a layer of electrolyte **30** may be deposited over the oxidizable material **130**. In some embodiments, material **130** may be a material suitable for use as the cathode **40**. As shown in FIGS. 4A and 4B, an
5 inert material, such as silicon oxide or aluminum oxide, for example, may be deposited and patterned to form an "anchoring" portion **145** to hold a peripheral portion of the oxidizable material in contact with the electrolyte. In contrast to the portions of material under anchoring portions **145**, the adjacent portions of
10 material swell when they oxidize. When the portions adjacent to anchoring portions **145** oxidize, the swelling of the oxidizable material forms the openings for manifold **60**. In some embodiments, the step of depositing an electrolyte **30** may be performed after forming the manifold **60** of chamber **70**.

Manifold **60** of chamber **70** may be formed by tape-casting the electrolyte **30**. A
15 method for forming manifold **60** of chamber **70** is illustrated by FIG. 5E and by FIGS. 6 and 7. An unfired ("green") tape **35** of electrolyte material carrying the cathode **40** and anode **50** is provided (step **S81**). A mold (parts **200** and **210**) is provided (step **S82**) for forming a desired shape for the chamber. The upper part **200** of the mold has cavities **220** shaped for the roof of the chamber. The
20 lower part **210** of the mold has bosses **230** shaped for the inner wall of the chamber. Both sides of the unfired tape **35** of electrolyte material carrying the cathode and anode are coated with a suitable solvent (step **S83**) if necessary, e.g., an alcohol such as isopropyl alcohol (IPA), or solvent mixture. Other solvents suitable for particular green tapes include (but of course are not limited
25 to) ethanol and methyl ethyl ketone, for example. The solvent or solvent mixture should be suitable for use with the particular composition of the green tape and its binder. The unfired tape **35** of electrolyte material carrying the cathode and anode is pressed (step **S84**, indicated by arrows **240**) to form the desired chamber shape. The shaped elements are assembled by pressing with
30 substrate **20** (FIG. 7). The assembled and shaped elements are co-fired (step **S85**) to form the chamber.

In preparing the unfired tape **35** of electrolyte material carrying the cathode and anode, a cathode material may be deposited and optionally patterned on at least one side of an unfired tape of electrolyte material. Deposition of the cathode material may be done by printing, e.g., by silk-screen-printing.

- 5 Alternative printing techniques include, but are not limited to transfer printing, spraying through a stencil mask, extrusion printing, extrusion printing with subsequent embossing, and other suitable printing techniques that may occur to those skilled in the art.

In the embodiment of FIG. 6, it is deposited on the top surface of the tape and
10 not patterned. Similarly, an anode material may be deposited and patterned on at least one side of the unfired tape of electrolyte material. In the embodiment of FIG. 6, it is deposited on the bottom surface of the tape and patterned to form the interior surface of the roof of manifold **60**. Again, as for the cathode,
15 deposition and patterning of the anode material may be done by silk-screen printing, for example. In embodiments wherein both cathode **40** and anode **50** are deposited and patterned on the same side of the unfired tape **35** of electrolyte material, both may be deposited and patterned by silk-screen-printing or other suitable printing techniques.

One or more openings **80** and/or **90** communicating with chamber **70** may be
20 formed through the substrate under the chamber. Openings **80** and/or **90** may be adapted for flow of the fuel and/or oxidant into the chamber or for exhaust flow of depleted fuel and/or depleted oxidant out of the chamber. Similarly, a third opening (not shown) may be formed through the substrate under the chamber, communicating with the chamber and adapted for exhaust flow of
25 depleted fuel and/or depleted oxidant out of the chamber.

By combining various elements of fabrication methods performed in accordance with the invention, a method may be practiced comprising the steps of providing a substrate, depositing (and optionally patterning) an electrolyte upon the substrate, depositing and patterning a cathode in contact with the electrolyte,
30 depositing and patterning an anode spaced apart from the cathode and in contact with the electrolyte, forming a first chamber extending over at least the

anode (the first chamber including an integral manifold for the fuel), forming a second chamber extending over at least the cathode (this chamber including an integral manifold for the oxidant), removing at least a portion of the substrate under the anode and cathode (leaving a membrane portion), forming a first
5 opening through the substrate under the first chamber (this opening communicating with the first chamber and being adapted for flow of fuel into the first chamber), and forming a second opening through the substrate under the second chamber (communicating with the second chamber and being adapted for flow of oxidant into that chamber). The membrane portion may be
10 supported around its entire periphery, or at least part of the membrane portion may be removed so as to leave the membrane portion cantilevered.

According to another aspect of the invention, a method is provided for using a manifold in a MEMS-based fuel cell of the type using a fuel and an oxidant. In this method a substrate carrying an electrolyte, a cathode in contact with the
15 electrolyte, and an anode spaced apart from the cathode and in contact with the electrolyte are provided. An integral manifold for at least one of the fuel and oxidant is also provided, the integral manifold extending over at least a portion of the electrolyte and over at least a portion of one of the anode and cathode. At least one of the fuel and oxidant is supplied through the integral manifold to
20 the electrolyte and to at least one of the anode and cathode. An opening extending through the substrate and communicating with the integral manifold may be used for flowing at least one of the fuel and oxidant through the opening and into the integral manifold. Similarly, an opening extending through the substrate and communicating with the integral manifold may be used for flowing
25 at least one of the depleted fuel and oxidant out of the integral manifold and through the opening. A catalytic combustor may be provided within the integral manifold.

INDUSTRIAL APPLICABILITY

Fuel-cell structures made in accordance with the present invention and
30 specially-adapted methods performed in accordance with the invention are useful in manufacture of compact portable fuel cells.

Although the foregoing has been a description and illustration of specific embodiments of the invention, various modifications and changes thereto can be made by persons skilled in the art without departing from the scope and spirit of the invention as defined by the following claims. For example, the order of

5 performing various steps may be varied and various functionally equivalent materials may be substituted for those used in the embodiments described herein.